



The STEWARD

North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation
This month's publication paid for by Friends of Fort Macon.

Michael F. Easley
 Governor

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William G. Ross Jr.
 Secretary, DENR

PARKS ATTENDANCE SETS RECORD

13.2 MILLION VISITORS ENJOYED STATE PARKS IN 2002

A record 13.2 million people visited North Carolina's state parks in 2002, a year in which the park system also experienced a downsized operating budget and staff cutbacks that left fewer park employees to deal with the crowds.

The tallies completed last month by the NC Division of Parks and Recreation mark an increase of five percent over 2001 and a dramatic 160 percent increase during the past 20 years. In 1982, 5.1 million people visited the parks system.

"We are pleased and excited that more people than ever are discovering our state parks, but the record numbers came at a difficult time for us," said Phil McKnelly, director of the division.

"Budget cutbacks in 2002-03 forced the loss of 13 positions. That came on the heels of a two-year hiring freeze that left many parks shorthanded," he said. "That so many people found a good experience in our parks is a tribute to the dedication of our permanent rangers, maintenance mechanics and field office staff."



THE JULY FOURTH CROWD AT JORDAN LAKE STATE RECREATION AREA FILLS THE PARK WELL BEFORE NOON.

Also in 2002, five of the system's 32 parks and recreation areas logged more than one million visitors. Those are Jockey's Ridge and Fort Macon state parks and Falls Lake, Jordan Lake and Kerr Lake state recreation areas. Jordan Lake, Kerr Lake and Fort Macon also rank among the top ten tourist destinations in North Carolina, according to the NC Department of Commerce.

Eighteen state parks experienced increases in visitation during the year, the most significant being at Fort Fisher State Recreation Area (49 percent), Lake Norman State Park (41 percent), Gorges State Park (53 percent), Jordan Lake State Recreation Area (25 percent) and New River State Park (18 percent).

Spending Lags

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, visitation at the state parks grew at a faster rate than the state's

STEWARD IN PRINT AGAIN THANKS TO FRIENDS' SUPPORT

After two years as a web-based newsletter, The Steward returns to print this month thanks to the strong support of people interested in state parks.

Friends of Fort Macon is sponsoring this issue, and a consortium of other park-support organizations and the statewide Friends of State Parks

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Department of Environment and Natural Resources

UP CLOSE AND 'PERSONNEL'

Michael Britton was promoted to Park Ranger II at Crowders Mountain State Park. He had worked there as Park Ranger I for more than two years and also had served as a seasonal. He has a bachelor's degree in biology from East Tennessee State University.

F. Jean Cameron was hired as Office Assistant III at Raven Rock State Park. She had previously worked at the NC Department of Correction. Cameron has an associate's degree in human services technology from Central Carolina Community College.

Christopher Day was promoted to Park Ranger III at Kerr Lake State Recreation Area. He had worked at Falls Lake State Recreation Area as Park Ranger II since July, 2001. He has a bachelor's degree in outdoor education/environmental studies from Montreat College. Day has several years of related experience, including a seasonal job as a wilderness counselor for young adults diagnosed with learning disorders. He has also worked as a firefighter and a deputy sheriff.

Matthew Farris was

promoted to Park Ranger II at Fort Fisher State Recreation Area from Cliffs of the Neuse State Park, where he had worked as Park Ranger I since October, 2000. He has a bachelor's degree in parks and recreation management from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. He has also worked as assistant park ranger, general utility worker and intern at Carolina Beach State Park.

Cynthia Gabrys comes to Jockey's Ridge State Park as Office Assistant III. She has a bachelor's degree in office management/computer science from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA. She has 15 years of office experience.

Gaylene Goodwin was hired as Office Assistant III at Jordan Lake State Recreation Area. Goodwin has eight years of office assistant experience.

John T. Graham was hired from the NC Department of Commerce as Maintenance Mechanic I at Crowders Mountain State Park. He is a certified Firefighter II and currently volunteers with the Agriculture Center Volunteer Fire Department in Bessemer City. Graham has maintenance experience at Crowders Mountain State Park and the North Carolina Welcome Center at Kings Mountain.

Jason Gwinn was hired as Park Ranger II at Medoc Mountain State Park. He has a bachelor's degree in forestry with a minor in forest recreational management from the University of Maine. He worked as a firefighter and forestry aid in Maine and worked with the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps.

From The Director's Desk

Dear fellow employees:

The first thing you'll notice about The Steward this month is its return to a printed format after existing for about two years as a website publication only. This is made possible through contributions from a consortium of volunteer parks support groups and by the statewide Friends of State Parks.

Although The Steward has been – and will continue to be – a valuable addition to our website, we felt a need to better reconnect with our supporters and constituent groups across the state. In a busy world, it's sometimes easier to thumb through a printed publication than to remember to search the web for news of particular interest. Folks who visit the state parks often and those with strong ties of support have told us they don't want to miss news about what's going on in the division.

The printed newsletter is also a handy tool to educate citizens about special facts of the parks system that may be unfamiliar to them. There are exciting things happening in the areas of environmental education, natural resource protection, ranger development and administration of the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund. There are also grants and research programs of interest to relatively small, but important, groups.

So, I hope you enjoy The Steward's return to the printed page. And, many, many thanks to our friends who made it possible.

Sincerely,

Phil

Philip K. McNelly

PARK 'SERVANT' HELMS RETIRES

Dennis Helms was normally so quiet during his 30 years with the state parks system that it was sometimes hard to tell when he was around. But for his colleagues and for Merchants Millpond State Park, Helms will be conspicuous by his absence.

That was a consensus of division employees and friends who gathered at a retirement dinner in Edenton Feb. 8 to honor Helms who devoted 22 years of his career to "the pond."

Helms has been a "by-the-book" park superintendent who led by example, said the park's newest ranger, Curtis Dykstra. "He ran the park like its servant. He's truly an inspiration to all state employees, young and old alike."

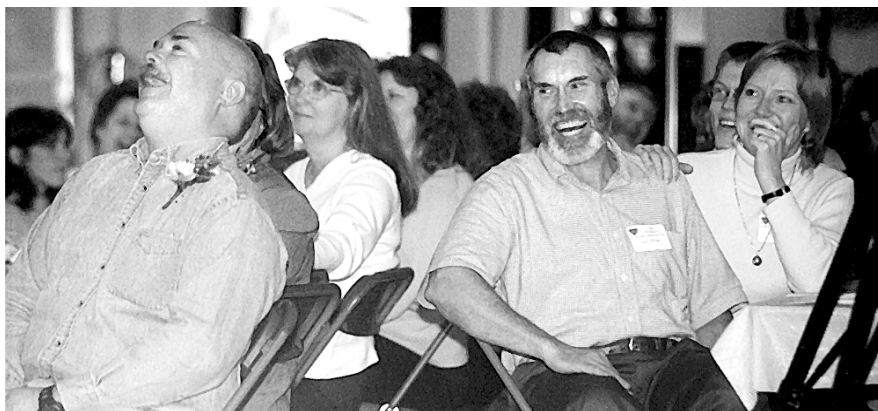
Tom Wells, former state parks superintendent, said that Helms' leadership was complemented by a sense of purpose. "He was a true steward of God's creation and had the good sense to surround himself with others who embraced that preservation ethic."

Helms himself said that he simply fell in love with Merchants Millpond.

Helms was a young ranger at Goose Creek State Park in 1981 where former ranger Cecil Frost watched over the pond which, at the time, was operated as a satellite of Goose Creek. "He brought me with him just one time and I thought it was the prettiest place I'd seen," Helms said.

As soon as it became a park, Helms applied for the superintendent's post.

Helms was born in Stanly County and graduated from North Stanly High School in 1967 in the same class as Tommy Waggoner, who just retired from Hang-



HELMS, LEFT, RANGER FLOYD WILLIAMS GET A LAUGH DURING 'ROAST.'

ing Rock State Park. He attended East Carolina University, then earned a bachelor's degree in social science from Campbell University in 1972.

He joined the division as a ranger at Fort Macon State Park, then served six years at Duke Power (Lake Norman) State Park. While there, he met his wife Barbara, a native of Iredell County. They have three children, Mary Ruth, Justin and Charles.

Lewis Ledford, superintendent of state parks, said that as he examined Helms' personnel file, two things became evident – that it was full of commendations and that Helms obviously had a commitment to training. Helms sought emergency medical and prescribed fire training long before that training became standard procedure in the division, Ledford said. "He made self improvement a real goal."

Helms also got high marks from both his former boss, Cliff Phillips, and William Berry, the current east district superintendent.

"Dennis and I became very close. He didn't much like that, though," Phillips joked as he presented Helms with a hat, sunglasses, shorts, a blue ribbon for being a good boy and a plastic hamburger representing Helms' favorite meal.

As tribute from his colleagues, Helms also received a lawnmower and a collection of lawn care equipment for a new house that he's building in Gates County.

Berry said that Helms has already volunteered to come back to the park to work on special projects.

"I've been touched by working with Dennis and can truly say I got more from Dennis than I could give him. He's truly a remarkable man," Berry said. "He may be leaving the system, but the state parks system and the millpond will never leave Dennis."

Helms has also made a mark in the close knit community of Gates County. Neta Byrum, a fellow member of Middle Swamp Baptist Church, told him, "We're so glad fate brought you to Merchants Millpond and that you chose to be our friend."

Helms told the crowd that even though he sometimes complained about "this outfit" in moments of frustration, he is a true believer in the state parks system.

"The truth is, it has been a privilege for me to have been a part of this outfit," he said. "Folks, I'm going to miss each and every one of you. You mean more to me than I can ever express."

SKILLS TRAINING PREPARES RANGERS

By CHARLIE PEEK
Public Information Officer

How do you “interpret” Mother Nature?

“It’s just different when you’re working with people outside than when you’re standing there inside a dark room with a slide projector,” said Marti Kane, lead interpretation and education specialist with the parks system.

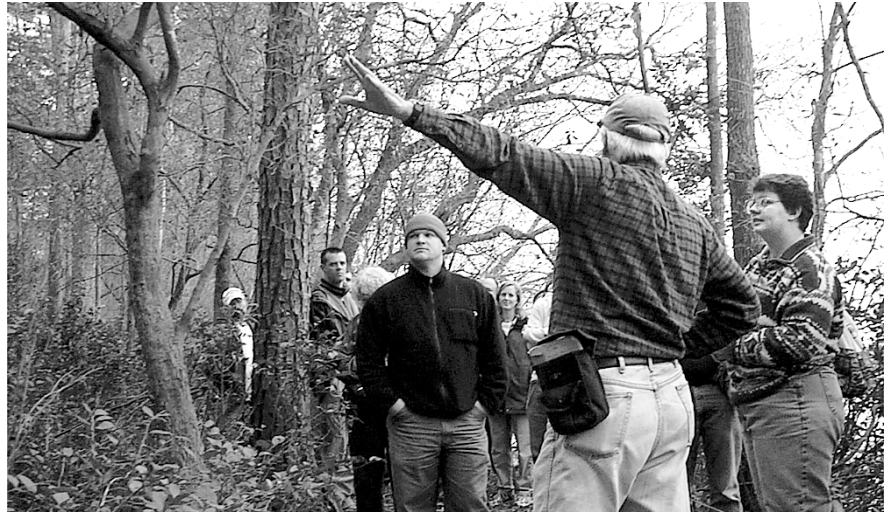
But, it’s exactly what a park ranger is asked to do, standing there on warm Saturday afternoons with maybe 20 children and adults waiting in anticipation and several thousand acres of nature’s magnificence spread out in a state park. How do you begin to explain your own passion for that place?

To help, the NC Division of Parks and Recreation offers basic skills training to new rangers. The most recent was held in March at a group camp at Singletary Lake State Park. It’s four days of nonstop program preparation, lectures, practice nature hikes and critiques by peers, by veteran staffers and sometimes by unblinking video cameras.

“If our message is important, and we think it is, we want to reach all visitors possible with it and in the most effective way,” Kane said.

Last year, more than a quarter million visitors attended scheduled ranger programs in the state parks. Nearly as many more stopped a ranger for a question that led to a brief conversation about a park’s resources – an encounter considered a “roving interpretation” by the division.

The scheduled programs, usually lasting from 45 minutes to 1 1/2 hours, often revolve around a park’s resource theme –



RICHARD LEBLOND, CENTER, AND RANGER KELLEY THOMPSON, RIGHT, DISCUSS TECHNIQUES FOR NATURE HIKES WITH NEW PARK RANGERS.

for example, geology at Pilot Mountain or water quality at Lake Waccamaw. But, rangers are also encouraged to develop programs around their own interests, be that astronomy, botany, local history or animal lore.

The skills training is also a chance for rangers to trade tricks of the trade, such as how to use cadence, eye contact, props, even music to prompt visitors to take a second look at what they’re seeing and maybe fall in love with nature and with a state park.

Rangers are encouraged to be creative, to find techniques that suit their personalities and to stay flexible, “so they’re seeing the trees as well as the forest while doing their work,” Kane said.

Perhaps the largest audience at parks is children, especially from school field trips and youth group and scout outings. Lori Fleming, north district specialist told the class participants that some studies show that many youngsters develop their attitudes about nature between the ages of four and six.

“We have the three R’s we want to teach – respect, responsibility and reverence for

nature,” said Fleming, adding that working with children can be taxing and uplifting at the same time. “It’s great for me to look at nature through a child’s eyes again, to get back a little of that sense of wonder about nature.”

This year, 23 rangers enrolled in Skills I training. In past years, that session has alternated annually with the advanced Skills II. Budget cutbacks disrupted that schedule recently – the last session was in November 2000 – as training funds dwindled and were directed at mandatory law enforcement training required of all rangers.

Lewis Ledford, superintendent of state parks, told the trainees that being a park ranger, “is nothing less than hard work and dedication, but it returns the satisfaction of making a difference in people’s lives.”

And interpretation, he said, was well defined by York Edwards of Parks Canada who once wrote, “It aims at giving people new insights, new enthusiasms, new interests. . . a sort of pied piper leading people easily into new and fascinating worlds that their senses never really penetrated before.”

population, while in recent years, the operating budget has remained relatively flat.

North Carolina ranks 47th in the nation in per capita spending for state park operations at \$2.76. That's just slightly above half the national average of \$5.72. Ten years ago, the state's ranking was 49th. North Carolina is also tied for 46th in spending on park operations as a percentage of the entire state budget.

Currently, the parks system has an appropriated operating budget of \$19.7 million, down one percent from last year. That's after applying revenues of \$2.9 million returned to the system from fees for camping, cabin rentals, entrance fees and the like. Entrance fees are charged only at Jordan and Falls lakes where they are a condition of leases with the US Army Corps of Engineers.

Resources Strained

As of Dec. 30, the parks system operated with a field staff of 299, including 156 rangers and superintendents. If averaged throughout the system, each ranger or superintendent would have served 84,615 visitors during the year, or 250 visitors a day.

In addition, a maintenance staff numbering fewer than 150 cared for more than \$336 million worth of infrastructure – buildings, roads, parking areas, utility systems and campgrounds.

"Our rangers, maintenance staffs and office staffs were incredibly busy last season," said Lewis Ledford, superintendent of state parks. "Campgrounds, picnic shelters and group facilities were usually full on weekends and bursting at the seams on holidays. Day-use areas at the three reservoirs – favored by picnickers, boaters and swimmers – were often at capacity well before noon."

"Those crowded conditions not only put tremendous pressure on the natural resources and our

facilities, but also on rangers in terms of visitor service and law enforcement," he said.

Beyond the 32 state parks and recreation areas, rangers also aid in the management of 16 natural areas and seven state lakes. Many of the natural areas are managed as satellite units of a state park. In all, 170,388 acres of land and water are managed by the division.

Education Efforts

Despite very busy schedules, rangers reached more people than ever through interpretive and educational programs at the state parks. These scheduled programs include the traditional nature hikes and birdwatching outings as well as more cutting-edge programs being requested by visitors such as astronomy nights, flyfishing clinics, and kayaking.

For the fiscal year ending June 2002, the division logged attendance of 253,205 at these educational events, an increase of more than 4 percent over the previous year. Many of those attending were schoolchildren on weekday outings and families coming to weekend programs. Also, more than 1,300 teachers and environmental educators attended programs to help them integrate environmental education into their core curriculums.

Total numbers of structured programs increased by 11 percent to 7,436 – about 20 each day.

McKnelly said that the boom in activity at state parks can be attributed only in part to the state's population growth.

"I think our field staff will tell you from experience that interest in our state parks jumps during difficult economic times," he said. "The parks represent inexpensive, family-oriented entertainment and education that's close at hand. Also, the parks offer a greater variety of recreational activities and educational programs than ever before."

FRIENDS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

have pledged support for printing in coming months.

"This will better enable us to make known to our stakeholders those issues and news affecting state parks as well as our mission of providing recreation opportunities and protecting the natural diversity and educating citizens about our natural resources," said Lewis Ledford, superintendent of state parks, who is coordinating the project.

Those stakeholders are a broad and diverse group, Ledford said, ranging from more than 300 members of park advisory committees to members of trust fund boards, to statewide and regional conservation organizations, to the 170 members of the General Assembly and, of course, park visitors.

"I have had a number of people express interest in seeing the newsletter published again.

Three more friends groups have already indicated their interest in sponsoring the printing of an issue – an obvious indicator of support with a capital 'S.' It continues that heritage of public advocacy and the value that citizens have for state parks."

The newsletter will continue to appear on the division's website at www.ncsparks.net along with additional details about special events and activities, educational programs and other initiatives of the Division of Parks and Recreation.

Efforts to be cost-efficient in publishing the newsletter will continue, including the hand-delivery of as many copies as possible.

Any stakeholder group interested in assisting in the project can contact Ledford at 919-841-4047 or at lewis.ledford@ncmail.net.

AMEN CORNER

The following was recently sent to Lewis Ledford, superintendent of state parks.

Dear Lewis,

I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the assistance that you and your organization have provided to the livestock farmers of this state by supporting the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services with the Hay Alert Program. Without your assistance and dedication many farmers across the state would have been required to close or reduce the size of their farms by selling their livestock and land. This would have had a lasting effect on the future of many individual farm families, by forcing existing farmers off the farm while eliminating this lifestyle opportunity for younger generations.

We have transported more than 10,000 round bales of much needed hay and representative of organizations such as yours have logged in excess of 90,000 delivery miles in support of this program. We have been able to assist more than 250 farmers with locating and transporting hay. This has saved the farmers more than \$180,000 dollars in transportation costs. Feedback from farmers who have participated in this program has been tremendous. While they have expressed their appreciation for the hay, they also stated that they appreciated the understanding and support expressed by everyone involved in this project. This includes you and the people of your organization who participated. It speaks loudly when we all come together to meet a need in our State. We can all be proud of our efforts that helped save the livelihood of many of our fellow farmers.

Although our transportation assistance will end on January 31, 2003, we will continue to operate the web site to assist farmers in locating hay throughout the winter months.

Let me assure you that the success of this program would not have been possible without your help. Thanks again for supporting our farmers in North Carolina.

With kind regards, I remain,

Meg Scott Phipps
Commissioner
North Carolina Department of Agriculture and
Consumer Services

AUTHORITY APPROVES PARKS LAND PROJECTS

The NC Parks and Recreation Authority allocated \$2.43 million to land acquisition projects at six state parks and three state natural areas at its March 21 meeting at Carolina Beach State Park.

The action brings the total 2002-03 allocation of the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund for land acquisition in the parks system to \$5.3 million.

The trust fund was created in 1994 by the NC General Assembly as a dedicated fund for recreation throughout the state. It is supported by a portion of the state's real estate deed stamp tax. Sixty-five percent of the fund is set aside for parks system land acquisition, capital projects and repairs and renovations; 30 percent provides matching grants to local governments for recreation projects; and five percent is set aside for coastal beach access.

Carol Tingley, chief of planning and natural resources for the parks system, presented the land acquisition projects to the authority. They are:

- β Elk Knob State Natural Area, \$350,000 for purchase of a boundary property that will improve access from a state secondary road.
- β Bushy Lake State Natural Area, \$650,000 to expand the area by preserving about 1,000 acres in tracts at Big White and Bushy Lake bays.
- β Dismal Swamp State Natural Area, \$400,000 to purchase land or easement for access at the southern boundary.
- β Crowders Mountain State Park, \$50,000 for an inholding with homesite.
- β Goose Creek State Park, \$95,000 for boundary property and a home that can be used as a ranger residence.
- β Lake James State Park, \$50,000 for an inholding and small cabin.
- β Raven Rock State Park, \$275,000 for an inholding on the park's north side, and two tracts near the park's entrance.
- β South Mountains State Park, \$400,000 for two tracts near the park's entrance that will provide for water quality protection.
- β Stone Mountain State Park, \$155,000 for an inholding that overlooks the park's tent and trailer campground.

The authority also allocated \$50,000 to contract a study of aquatic vegetation in light of proposed water level changes at Merchants Millpond State Park.

NORTH CAROLINA STATE PARKS MONTHLY ATTENDANCE REPORT 2003

PARK	FEBRUARY TOTAL		YTD FEBRUARY		% CHANGE (2002/2003)	
	2003	FEB. 2003	2002	FEB. 2002	FEB.	YTD
CAROLINA BEACH	12,362	22,370	10,878	20,010	14%	12%
CLIFFS OF THE NEUSE	3,669	7,929	4,901	9,632	-25%	-18%
CROWDER'S MOUNTAIN	9,852	26,112	18,813	36,723	-48%	-29%
ENO RIVER	12,264	24,325	21,105	40,495	-42%	-40%
OCCONEECHEE MOUNTAIN	0	0	2,380	4,284	-100%	-100%
FALLS LAKE	15,771	22,089	20,988	42,756	-25%	-48%
FORT FISHER	32,820	55,021	36,910	55,271	-11%	0%
FORT MACON	37,790	77,712	51,024	99,794	-26%	-22%
GOOSE CREEK	7,179	15,446	8,932	17,391	-20%	-11%
GORGES	2,973	6,895	5,470	11,055	-46%	-38%
HAMMOCKS BEACH	8,787	16,674	6,012	15,030	46%	11%
HANGING ROCK	8,734	18,100	15,445	29,793	-43%	-39%
JOCKEY'S RIDGE	43,611	104,683	22,287	42,060	96%	149%
JONES LAKE	4,276	9,360	4,088	8,084	5%	16%
JORDAN LAKE	8,886	19,034	25,808	55,164	-66%	-65%
KERR LAKE	39,620	76,424	54,712	110,920	-28%	-31%
LAKE JAMES	6,955	13,612	9,985	16,541	-30%	-18%
LAKE NORMAN	11,176	11,926	16,471	31,271	-32%	-62%
LAKE WACCAMAW	4,696	9,384	5,204	10,452	-10%	-10%
LUMBER RIVER	3,390	5,050	1,265	4,250	168%	19%
MEDOC MOUNTAIN	0	0	2,428	4,836	-100%	-100%
MERCHANT'S MILLPOND	2,852	5,423	5,523	10,440	-48%	-48%
MORROW MOUNTAIN	11,676	22,956	18,120	35,220	-36%	-35%
MOUNT JEFFERSON	4,544	11,963	3,796	8,083	20%	48%
MOUNT MITCHELL	2,317	5,755	6,480	10,268	-64%	-44%
NEW RIVER	4,836	12,988	4,308	13,564	12%	-4%
PETTIGREW	5,286	10,365	2,562	6,465	106%	60%
PILOT MOUNTAIN	13,115	26,646	21,446	39,005	-39%	-32%
RAVEN ROCK	4,192	9,395	7,050	12,687	-41%	-26%
SINGLETARY LAKE	525	1,178	644	1,272	-18%	-7%
SOUTH MOUNTAINS	6,480	12,980	8,402	16,548	-23%	-22%
STONE MOUNTAIN	13,324	20,856	20,940	49,680	-36%	-58%
WEYMOUTH WOODS	1,940	4,391	1,853	3,928	5%	12%
WILLIAM B. UMSTEAD	14,740	24,263	32,345	56,541	-54%	-57%
SYSTEMWIDE TOTAL	360,638	711,305	478,575	929,513	-25%	-23%

Mission

The mission of the North Carolina Division of Parks & Recreation is:

to protect North Carolina's natural diversity;

to provide and promote outdoor recreation opportunities throughout North Carolina;

and

to exemplify and encourage good stewardship of North Carolina's natural resources

for all citizens and visitors of North Carolina.

SAFETY ZONE

Prevent the Pain of Back Strain

- β Take extra care with your back; except for colds, back pain is the leading reason for trips to the doctor.
- β Size up a load before you lift and get help if you need it.
- β Always practice safe lifting; keep your back straight, lift with your legs and hold the object close to your body.
- β Push rather than pull a heavy load.



The Steward

NC Division of Parks and Recreation
Public Information Office
1615 MSC
Raleigh, NC 27699-1615